



## Stress Management Preparedness for First Responders

While the recent, horrific events in Newtown, Connecticut have affected us all, there is one aspect of a tragedy such as this that often goes without discussion: the effects on the first responders. Law enforcement personnel and other first responders are often privy to sights, sounds, and details of crisis situations the civilian masses could not fathom or handle; however, even the most well-trained, veteran officers may experience difficulty coping with the aftermath of a tragedy.

The healing process after a stressful or traumatic event is unique to each officer. In a recent article published by *PoliceOne.com*, criminal justice professor and 25-year law enforcement veteran Charles Russo, Ph.D., stresses that officers should understand their reactions to traumatic events are common. "We [need to] assure them that what they're going through is normal, what they witnessed was an abnormal event, and the reaction they're going to have is in fact normal."

According to the article, approximately 80 percent of officers involved in tragic incidents will be able to cope on their own; the other 20 percent will require professional assistance. Russo says it is important for officers to know seeking help is not a sign of weakness, but rather a step toward recovery.

### **What can a police department do?**

Russo says he, like many officers, has been involved in shootings and other stressful situations, and what helped him cope the most was knowing what to expect emotionally and psychologically. "I had already done my homework, so when the emotional rollercoaster started, I knew I wasn't going crazy," he said. "If I didn't have that knowledge beforehand...I can easily understand why people think they're losing it."

Departments can assist even before these tragic events take place. Response awareness training, availability of psychological professionals, and crisis preparedness modules have proven effective in helping officers cope after witnessing traumatic events on the job. Departments should frequently discuss crisis management resources before an event, and reiterate their presence after one occurs. Russo suggests implementing a "critical incident stress management team" in every department. He adds that immediately after the first response to a tragic or stressful event, the team should set up a place for law enforcement and other first responders to gather, away from the public and the media. This location should be a place for first responders to debrief and discuss what they experienced with others who were there, and where trained professionals are immediately available to start the healing process.

While no officer can be totally prepared for each crisis situation they will experience during their career, it is important they know their department will support their short- and long-term recovery needs.

For more information on post-traumatic coping and treatment options, visit the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD at [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).